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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAHRAN 000217

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PLEASE PASS TO NEA/ARP JOSHUA HARRIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 8/15/2019
TAGS: KIRF, KISL, PGOV, PHUM, SA
SUBJECT: SAUDI PROVINCIAL AUTHORITIES CLOSE SHIA MOSQUES IN
AL-KHOBAR, LEADERS MEET WITH KING ABDULLAH

REF: A. A. RIYADH 346
B. B. DHAHRAN 8
C. C. DHAHRAN 14

DHAHRAN 00000217 001.2 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: Kevin Kreutner, Acting Consul General, EXEC, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)
SUMMARY:

1. (C/NF) During the past year the provincial government in the Eastern Province (EP) has closed five Shia mosques (four Twelver Shia and one Ismaili Shia) in the commercial city of al-Khobar, with the last two being closed in the past two weeks. The provincial government reportedly carried out the closures by arresting and threatening to arrest the mosque owners and/or

imams if they continued to hold prayers and by posting police near the mosques. Post contacts point to Prince Mohammed bin Fahd, governor of the EP, as the driving force behind the closures. The authorities have reportedly told the mosque owners that the closures were due to improper zoning and lack of appropriate permits. However, past and pending requests to build Shia mosques in al-Khobar have reportedly not been granted. On July 26 a delegation of Shia leaders from al-Khobar met with King Abdullah to raise this issue. END SUMMARY.

SHIA MOSQUES OF AL-KHOBAR:

2. (C/NF) In an August 10 meeting, XXXXXXXXXXXX(strictly protect), the XXXXXXXXXXXX, explained to PolOff that the Shia mosques in al-Khobar are known as "Waqf." As opposed to a typical mosque with a towering minaret and loudspeakers announcing the call to prayer, these Waqfs involve an individual opening his home (or a part of his home) for public prayer services. The Waqfs in al-Khobar are sanctioned by local Shia clerics as suitable alternatives to traditional mosques, which the Saudi authorities have not granted permits to build. There are reportedly about 20,000 Shia living in al-Khobar (out of total population of approximately 411,000), many of whom have attended prayer services at these mosques/Waqfs for more than a decade.

3. (C/NF) Four of the mosques belong to the Twelver or Imami Shia, the most common sect living in the EP, XXXXXXXXXXXXreported, with the fifth mosque belonging to the Ismaili Shia, who originated from Najran. The bustling commercial city of al-Khobar is not a traditional homestead of the Saudi Shia. Most of the Shia residents moved to al-Khobar from al-Ahsa, Qatif, and Najran to find jobs with Saudi Aramco and other oil and gas companies. (NOTE: During the meeting with XXXXXXXXXXXXonly four mosques had been closed, but he was in the process of confirming a possible fifth closure. The next day he confirmed and published XXXXXXXXXXXX. END NOTE.)

PRINCE MOHAMMED GIVES THE GREEN LIGHT:

4. (C/NF) Several contacts claim that Prince Mohammed bin Fahd (MbF), the wealthy and influential son of the late King Fahd, is

behind the mosque closings, noting that the orders came from the provincial governor's office. XXXXXXXXXXXX (strictly protect), a human rights activist and founder of XXXXXXXXXXXX, told PolOff in an August 9 meeting

that MbF would have to personally approve the mosque closings before they could be carried out. He told PolOff that he recommended to the Ismaili leadership that they work through the newly appointed governor of Najran and son of King Abdullah. In his view, MbF will not lift the ban on Shia mosques in al-Khobar unless his hand is forced by the King. XXXXXXXXXXXX(strictly protect), a Sunni tribal leader, told

PolOff in an August 10 meeting that he sent a letter to the governor expressing concern about the al-Khobar mosque closings and the arrest of a Shia community leader. He said that MbF responded by saying that XXXXXXXXXXXX should not interfere in

DHAHRAN 00000217 002.2 OF 002

this matter.

SHIA AND MODERATE SUNNIS SPEAK OUT:

5. (C/NF) XXXXXXXXXXXX confirmed reports that Abdullah Saleh al-Muhanna was imprisoned in June 2009 for holding prayers in his home. He told PolOff that he spoke with al-Muhanna while he was in prison. Corroborating online reports, XXXXXXXXXXXX said that the Saudi authorities demanded that al-Muhanna sign a document promising not to hold prayer services in his home in the future. After initially refusing, XXXXXXXXXXXX said that al-Muhanna eventually signed a slightly different statement to the same effect and was subsequently released. (NOTE: XXXXXXXXXXXX is a self-proclaimed Sunni liberal and human rights activist. XXXXXXXXXXXX END NOTE.)

6. (C/NF) In mid-July, Sayyid Mohammad al-Nasser, a leading Shia cleric in al-Khobar, spoke out against the mosque closings and threatened to lead Friday prayers in the streets if necessary. Shia frustrations culminated with a small delegation of religious leaders from al-Khobar meeting with the King on July 26 in Taif. Several contacts confirmed that the delegation raised the al-Khobar mosque closings with the King, but a formal response has not been received yet. However, XXXXXXXXXXXX, who is in direct contact with the delegation, told PolOff that the King's court informed them that they will have a response on the issue by the end of this week (August 14) and that it will be "good news." They had not yet received the phone call from the King's court at the time of writing this telegram.

COMMENT:

7. (C/NF) Discriminatory measures such as the mosque closings in al-Khobar continue to be the modus operandi of elements of the SAG in their interactions with the Shia minority sect. This year has seen sectarian tensions rise to the point of clashes in Medina in February (ref A) and rare public protests in the EP in March (ref B, C). Although the Sunni-Shia tension that pervaded the Kingdom earlier this year has since dissipated, this latest act of discrimination has once again stirred the sectarian pot. King Abdullah's clear public stance on the need for dialogue and mutual respect between Sunnis and Shias may well result in moderating or reversing the mosque closing decision. While a welcome move if it happens, it will also underscore the significant and continuing internal differences on this issue that can only be resolved at the highest level. END COMMENT.
KREUTNER

=====CABLE ENDS=====